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Communication Activities for Teaching Vocabulary

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Introduction

In our previous paper (Takahashi and Shucart, 2009), we discussed the effectiveness of content-based instruction (CBI). As we pointed out, CBI provides meaningful content for learners and promotes learners' acquisition of the target language. Then we set out to discover further ways to improve teaching techniques that are adaptable to CBI. One of these approaches was to try new communication activities in our classrooms. We decided to focus on communicative vocabulary teaching activities, and discovered many useful activities during the course of our ESL literature research. This paper will highlight the form-meaning dichotomy. First, we will discuss the definition of form and meaning. Then, we will examine communication activities through the lens of form and meaning. Finally, explicit examples of the pertinent classroom activities will be given to illustrate the form-meaning dichotomy. We hope to demonstrate that form-focused activities and meaning-focused activities are complementary.

Form-meaning Dichotomy

Attention to the role of form originated with Michael Long's term *focus on form*. The *form* in this case is distinguished from the traditional methods for teaching grammar, which isolated forms and arranged them in the curriculum. Long says the following:

> Focus on *form*....overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication. (Long, 1991, pp.45-46)

And another researcher describes the background of focus on form as follows:

> When instruction focuses on meaning to the virtual exclusion of the formal aspect of language, learners may fail to reach high levels of linguistic knowledge and performance despite extensive exposure to target language input. (White, 1998, p.85)

Attention to *form* can be seen to have developed concurrently with the recent trend towards meaning-focused communicative teaching.

Focus on Form in Vocabulary Teaching

The technical term *form* refers to the *form of a word* in vocabulary teaching, but denotes the singular and plural *form* or dative and possessive *form* in English grammar. For example, learners will understand that "to breed" has the vocabulary meaning "to produce offspring" and they will learn that breed is spelled b-r-e-e-d while its past tense form is

spelled b-r-e-d.

Focus on Meaning in Vocabulary Teaching

The term *meaning* refers to the symbolic idea that the word conveys. Therefore, attention to meaning involves focusing on the idea, message, story, or content, whichever is denoted by the word. Professor Paul Nation gives the following examples of meaning-focused activities in vocabulary teaching: "extensive graded reading, listening to stories, and working with familiar content". (Nation, 2001, p.400)

Communication Activities

When teaching vocabulary, it is helpful to have an overview of various types of activities. We will classify the activities by using the form-meaning dichotomy as a continuum.

form-focused ⇔ meaning-focused

Seen from a larger perspective, vocabulary is a key part of any communicative activity. Since meaning is created by the act of social discourse, paying attention to meaning is a crucial aspect of teaching vocabulary. We will classify the following activities into three groups: form-focused, form-meaning connections, and meaning-focused. Our criterion for classifying these activities is whether the meaningful contexts or the grammatical rules are adopted first in that particular activity.

List of communication activities

Form-focused Activities
- collocation dictation (Lewis, 2002, p.117)
- dictation (Nation & Newton, 1997, p.250)
- split information activities (Nation & Newton, 1997, p.242)

Form-meaning Connection Activities
- matching words and definitions (Nation, 2001, p.101)
- basic exercise patterns (Lewis, 2002, p.89)

Meaning-focused Activities
- ranking/discussion tasks (Nation & Newton, 1997, p.246)
- ask-and-answer activities (Nation & Newton, 1997, p.242)
- repeated reading (Nation & Newton, 1997, p.249)

Form-focused Activities

We know from experience that a learners' potential for the acquisition of grammatical terms is quite low when those grammatical terms are taught without recourse to pre-teaching tasks. However, we also know that it is possible to change the traditional form-focused activities into more communicative ones. Dictation is an activity that contains the rules of sound and form. Dictation activities generally provide opportunities for teaching collocations. We classified dictation as a form-focused activity because learners participate without paying much attention to meaning, even though the knowledge of a word, especially that of collocations, implies the semantic aspect of that word.

As can be readily observed in the classroom, learners often communicate *form* in communication activities. Nation (2001) reports that a larger percentage of learner utterances were related to *focus on form* rather than *focus on meaning* in split information activities. According to Hall (1992) a split information activity can be defined as follows:

Split information tasks involve two

> students sharing information to solve a common problem. The task cannot be done by one student without the information held by the other. As each has information which is essential to the overall completion of the work at hand, there must be information exchange through discussion. (p.72)

The term *information* leads us to believe that all communication activities are overtly meaningful. On the contrary, learners tend to exchange form-focused information, which inevitably increases their fluency in conversation.

Form-meaning Connection Activities

The connections between form and meaning are, in a sense, arbitrary and that is why acquiring vocabulary requires continuous effort. There are several activities that can be employed to intensify the form-meaning connection. The basic exercise patterns which Lewis (2003) introduces are: identifying chunks, matching, completing, categorizing, and deleting. All are useful as a prototype of form-focused exercises by which learners familiarize themselves with the form-meaning connections.

Meaning-focused Activities

When learners use higher cognitive levels of thinking, they tend to communicate more meaning-focused information. Nation (2001) shows us a few samples of such activities: the "ask-and-answer" activities and the information ranking activity. First, Nation quotes from Simcock (1993) and illustrates the ask-and-answer activities as follows: "Simcock (1993) studied learners' performance in ask-and-answer activities where students read a story in pairs and then respond to preset questions from their partners"(p.240). In the same chapter, Nation says a greater focus on word meaning was seen in the ranking information activity. "The learners must then critically assess and rank this information according to a set of rules"(p.248).

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In the Context of APU

This second part of the paper will illustrate the form-meaning dichotomy in teaching vocabulary in a specific ESP [English for Scientific Purposes] content-based class, and show how communicative activities can be effectively employed in what is, essentially, an immersion class for science majors. Akita Prefectural University is a science and technology institution with no English or other humanities majors. The chief use of English by the students will therefore be in text-oriented science classes rather than for the purpose of general conversation. Thus, the academic goal of the particular class discussed in this paper is to provide second year science majors with the tools to decipher and utilize key scientific concepts in English that they will encounter during their further studies. For that purpose, activities to enhance low-frequency vocabulary acquisition will be presented herein.

After thorough consideration and analysis of the student's specific needs a high school textbook (Dobson et. al., 2001) written for American native speakers was chosen as the classroom text. The first problem was to decide on the proper teaching methodology with which to present such a high-level text efficiently to Japanese university students. The archaic grammar-translation method utilized by traditional Japanese institutions was quickly ruled out. Reading specialist Neil J. Anderson's ACTIVE reading methodology was eventually chosen as the most

appropriate for our student's needs and then adapted to the specific requirements of the class. According to Anderson (1999), there are three reading process models: the *bottom-up model* starts with low-level reading processes such as phoneme recognition and builds up to identifying syntactic structures. The *top-down model* utilizes higher-level processes, such as integrating textual information with background knowledge, and generating and updating schema. The *interactive reading model* combines elements of both, such as decoding unfamiliar vocabulary while predicting what is coming next based on general knowledge. The *Interactive model* is the best description of what takes place in the mind of a fluent reader, and that is the methodology he presents. Anderson's ACTIVE reading methodology was created with the goal of improved reading fluency, whereas the goal of the ESP class is increased comprehension, so only the ACT portion of his ACTIVE acronym was deemed applicable to this specific class. In Anderson's model *A* stands for Activate Prior Knowledge; *C* stands for Cultivate Vocabulary; and *T* stands for Teach for Comprehension.

The composition and schedule of the class needs to be explicitly stated to put the class into the proper context. The excessive cost of importing the foreign textbooks limited the total number of students to 70, thus two classes of 30 to 40 students meet once per week for a 15-week semester. The students are all in their second year and the course is elective. At the beginning of the semester the students are forewarned about the difficulty of the class and the emphasis on reading and homework.

Classroom Procedure

One of the key decision for the class had to do with reading the text. To allow for varying levels of fluency and reading speeds it was deemed most appropriate to assign the actual reading as homework. The segment of the textbook covered by each weekly assignment is approximately 1500 words. The 90 minute class is divided into two sections. The first 45 minutes is devoted to going over the homework and then engaging in a guided discussion based on the concepts covered by the reading. This allows the students to utilize many of the low-frequency words encountered in the text within the proper scientific context. The first part of the homework concerns Reading Comprehension, and then Vocabulary Comprehension and Vocabulary Skills are addressed. Reading comprehension activities include *true or false* and *multiple-choice* questions. The vocabulary comprehension section involves matching words to definitions, *odd word out* and *fill-in the blanks* activities. The vocabulary skills includes prefix and suffix building exercises and constructing *mind maps* linking vocabulary to deeper cognitive categories. The in-class discussion questions are included with the homework so that the students have an opportunity to understand the topics and to make notes about what they plan to say in advance. This first section address Anderson's *C* - Cultivate Vocabulary and *T* - Teach Comprehension.

The final 45 minutes of each class is devoted to preparing the students for the next reading assignment. Like many high school science textbooks, this one includes a list of key words for each unit along with their definitions. To guarantee that the students all grasp the key concepts to be covered, the next handout starts with a section called Vocabulary Preview that provides the key words and definitions with Japanese translations. The other section of the Vocabulary Preview is a list of the low-frequency words that will almost certainly require them to

stop and use a dictionary in order to understand the text. To preclude this interruption, they are instructed to work in pairs to look-up and write down the definitions in Japanese and they are encouraged to keep the list at their sides while doing the homework.

In order to activate their prior knowledge of the topics to be read, the next two sections are conducted as pair work and group work discussions. *Getting Ready* utilizes photos and illustrations in the text to focus on predictions about what they think they will be the reading topic, as well as questions relating to their daily life. This focus on background schemata helps to personalize the lesson and make the reading more meaningful. The *Before You Read* section activates reading-specific schemata in conjunction with linking the low-frequency vocabulary to be encountered with scientific background knowledge they should have previously learned in their L1. The last 10-15 minutes of the class is a cool-down Word Search activity based on the low-frequency vocabulary words that they looked up at the beginning of this second section of the class.

Conclusion

As we have seen, communication activities can be organized within the continuum of form-focused and meaning-focused activities, and the two groups are complementary with each other. Although communicative activities are readily discernible in our form-meaning list of communication activities and provide a good resource for teachers, this list does not guarantee learners' acquisition of vocabulary because it merely provides teaching techniques and activities separate from the individual learners' interest. In other words, we need a new paradigmatic list that will systematically promote the students' participation in learning language, including vocabulary acquisition.

As can readily be seen in the examples elucidated in the second section of this paper, teaching low-frequency vocabulary with a variety of form-focused and meaning focused activities can be an especially effective methodology for keying background schemata and activating preexisting knowledge. Such a focus is crucial for designing an ESP curriculum with the goal of teaching students the higher-level reading skills necessary for understanding advanced science texts written for native speakers.

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